

VZCZCXRO6355
PP RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHCHI #0041 0650559
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 060559Z MAR 07
FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0412
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK PRIORITY 0669
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 0454

UNCLAS CHIANG MAI 000041

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [SENV](#) [AMED](#) [EAGR](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: CHOKING IN CHIANG MAI

11. Summary: Chiang Mai's annual bad air season is in full swing, reducing visibility to one kilometer and blocking the view of Chiang Mai's iconic Doi Suthep. A Thai government website posted a first-time-ever air pollution warning for Chiang Mai. Local scientists and medical experts have released research correlating the haze with health problems, respiratory issues, and cancer. However, government actions to stop agricultural burning and to reduce dust from other sources remain minimal. End summary

12. Although noticeable air pollution has been increasing in the region since the beginning of the dry season over three months ago, residents can now see, smell, and taste the bad air blanketing the Chiang Mai-Lamphun valley. The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment recognized the problem publicly on March 1 with a notice on the Pollution Control Department (PCD) website warning of health hazards for the elderly and children. As national media reported on the province's unsafe air, Chiang Mai Governor Wichai Srikwan signed an announcement March 6 ordering all local governments and agencies to control burning in their areas of responsibility.

13. From March 1-5 particulate matter smaller than 10 micrometer (referred to as PM10) in Chiang Mai averaged 149-198 micrograms per cubic meter, well over the Thailand standard of 120. In contrast, PM10 levels in Bangkok at Din Daeng, the closest monitoring station to the embassy, measured 54. During the same period, the Air Quality Index in Chiang Mai measured 113-134, versus a standard of 100.

14. The health impacts of the haze can be severe, according to research by local academics sponsored by the Thailand Research Fund and the Pollution Control Department. A Feb. 22-23 conference on the "Severity of Particulate Matter Problem and the Impacts on the Public Health in Chiang Mai and Lamphun" sponsored by these two agencies linked the high levels of particulate matter to cancer and respiratory illnesses.

15. The PCD attributed the heavy haze to forest fires in Thailand and neighboring countries combined with agricultural burning and climate conditions that cause an inversion. Additional sources, such as car exhaust, waste burning, construction and open cooking fires, add to the dust and poor visibility. While not yet as bad as last year's high of 248 mg/cubic meter on March 19, 2006, the dry season has several months to run before any rain can be expected.

16. Although burning is illegal in Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and other provinces, government officials are wary of antagonizing farmers and others by enforcing the ban. Apiwat Kunarak, Director of Environmental Office Region 1, told the CG that local elected officials fear losing votes if they press too hard on this issue. In a local radio appearance March 6 he appealed to the public to stop burning, noting the effects on "your father, mother, and children".

¶7. Comment: As media attention grows, municipal and provincial leaders are issuing public exhortations to address the pollution problem. The more announcements they make the more obvious it becomes that the government lacks the enforcement teeth needed to lessen burning and other sources of the dangerous haze over Chiang Mai.

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